

PARSHAS VAYIGASH: LOOKING AT - AND OUT FOR - EACH OTHER

by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz

Finally, the moment had come for Yosef to reveal himself to his brothers. The ebb and flow of Yosef's strategy for allowing his brothers to display remorse for their actions and complete their teshuvah (repentance) had run its course. Now it was time for Yosef to divulge his true identity.

The Torah's description of the final steps of this dramatic episode is very telling and is worthy of analysis for the powerful messages they contain.

Even a casual reading of the pesukim that discuss Yosef's revelation reveal how careful he was to maintain the dignity of his brothers during the remarkable moments of his disclosure. Yosef conveyed several salient messages of material and emotional support for his brothers - which comforted them during this most uncomfortable time in their lives.

Comfort Level

Yosef began by ordered that the room be emptied of all people when he spoke to his brothers. He calmed them by telling them that their actions in selling him as a slave were part of Hashem's Divine plan to permit them to survive the hunger that was widespread at that time. He informed them of his intent to support their entire families in the future. Finally, he followed up on his thoughtful words with meaningful actions. The Torah describes how he embraced his younger brother Binyomin (Bereishis 45:14) as they cried on each other's shoulders (I used current terminology of 'crying on each other's shoulders'. It is important to note, however, that the Torah's exact words were that they cried on each other's necks.) He then did the same for each of his other siblings, while embracing them and weeping.

The Torah describes how these embraces and displays of emotion 'broke the ice' with the brothers and created the comfort level that allowed them to converse with Yosef. Initially, they were rendered speechless by shock and shame (see Rashi, Midrash; 45:3). Now, after they saw Yosef's heartfelt feelings, the Torah notes, "V'acharei cain dibru echov eito - and after that [the embraces and tears], the brothers spoke to him" (45:14).

The Neck - Connecting Intellect and Emotion

What was the symbolism of the crying on their 'necks' and how did this encourage the brothers to speak openly to Yosef?

Rashi comments that the mention of the ânecks' conjures references to the spiritual centers of Hashem's world. As Sifsei Chachamim point out, Rashi's logical thread connecting the symbolism of the neck with the Beis Hamikdash would be congruent with the ones used by the wisest of all men, Shlomo Hamelech, in Shir Hashirim (7:5).

Rashi explains that Yosef cried on the neck of Binyamin as he foresaw the destruction of the first and second Batei Mikdash, which were located in the section of Binyamin, while Binyamin wept as he thought of Mishkan Shilo which was in the portion of Ephrayim, the son of Yosef.

Our chazal (sages) offer several reasons for the symbolism of the neck as a reference to the Beis Hamikdash (see commentaries for several examples).

Looking At - And Out For - Each Other

Permit me to share with you a beautiful thought from my dear chaver Rabbi Yaacov Haber s'h'lita regarding the symbolism of the forms of affection displayed by Yosef. His insight will clearly explain why the brothers derived such comfort from his actions.

In Yosef's youth, he aroused the envy of his brothers by relating the dreams that revolved around Yosef. Following the dictum of our sages that great tzadikim are judged for even miniscule indiscretions, the Torah faulted Yosef for grooming himself excessively (see Rashi, Bereishis 37:2) during his youthful years - which seemed to indicate traces of vanity unbecoming Yosef's exalted spiritual level.

Yosef Hatzadik grew into adulthood and corrected even these slight imperfections. He continuously looked to help others, and began interpreting the dreams of others - not only his own. (In fact, Rabbi Haber notes that Yosef's fortunes in prison began to improve the moment that he noticed the pain of the butler of Pharoh and asked him why he was so distraught.)

Rabbi Haber points out that the brothers noticed that the powerful Viceroy Yosef that stood before them was incredibly thoughtful and caring. Yosef worried about his brothers and tried to make his revelation as painless as possible. Most telling was the fact that Yosef was clearly turning outward, crying over his brother Binyomin's future tragedies - and not over the misfortunes that will befall his descendants.

I would like to suggest that the neck was the perfect symbolism for these messages to be conveyed to the brothers. The neck, after all, connects our heads (intellect) to our hearts (emotions). Tears flow from the heart, but are released through our eyes.

To live a decent and spiritual life both powers must be harnessed to serve Hashem - and to benefit our fellow humans. Yosef concentrated his final gesture of forgiveness and caring in the nerve conduit of the body - where the messages and impulses flow from one to the other. He had already explained to them that his intellect understood the reasons for his sale. Now he showed that his heart and mind share the same sentiment.

Additionally, it may have been the fact that Yosef shared sadness with the brothers that clinched things in their minds. Virtually anyone can share in our celebrations. But only those closest to us are there to comfort us during times of loneliness and disappointment.

Once the brothers saw Yosef sharing in their pain - with his emotion and intellect - they developed the comfort level that allowed them to converse with him.

Best wishes for a Gutten Shabbos

Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz and **Torah.org**.

Rabbi Horowitz is the founder and dean of Yeshiva Darchei Noam in Monsey, NY, as well as the founder and Program Director of Agudath Israel's Project Y.E.S. (Youth Enrichment Services), which helps at-risk teens and their parents. He is a popular lecturer on teaching and parenting topics in communities around the world, and is the author of several best-selling parenting tape and CD sets. For more information on Rabbi Horowitz's parenting tapes, visit <http://www.rabbihorowitz.com/> or call 845-352-7100 X 133.